United Nations S/2006/956

Security Council

Distr.: General
11 December 2006

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General on the Middle East

Introduction

1. As my term as Secretary-General nears its end, I would like to review the situation in the Middle East. Rather than summarize all the developments of the past ten years, I wish to focus on the attempts of the international community and the parties to reach a negotiated political solution to the enduring and painful conflicts that have bedevilled the region.

2. Today, the Middle East faces grim prospects, and is more complex, fragile and dangerous than it has been for many years. The various unresolved but increasingly interconnected conflicts in the region both feed and feed off a growing sense of estrangement between peoples of different faiths, with consequences throughout the world. Overall, the instability that prevails in the Middle East is the greatest regional challenge to international peace and security, and needs to be addressed far more thoroughly than it has been to date.

3. The failure to achieve a just and comprehensive solution to the long-festering Arab-Israeli conflict remains the major underlying source of frustration and instability in the region. Other, more recent, conflicts have been shaped by this failure, although they have inevitably taken on a dynamic of their own. I have addressed a number of these conflicts in other reports. However, I am convinced that the search for stability in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere will be greatly served by a concerted effort to address the legitimate aspirations of Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese to achieve two independent and secure States of Israel and Palestine; an end to the occupation of Arab land both in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the Golan Heights; and the comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East referred to in Security Council resolution 1701 (2006) and many other resolutions. A regional approach is needed to resolve the various crises and conflicts in the Middle East today, not least because progress in each arena is to a large extent dependent on progress in others.

The post-Oslo era

4. When I began my tenure as Secretary-General on 1 January 1997, Israelis and Palestinians were engaged in the implementation of the Oslo Accords of 1993, which had led to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994. This period witnessed continuing negotiations, gradual Israeli withdrawal from some parts of

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the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the growth of the Palestinian Authority. Under the terms of the Oslo Accords, the international community supported a process that involved step-by-step actions to build confidence and establish a basis from which to move towards resolution of all final status issues (Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders and relations and cooperation with other neighbours).

5. The period immediately following 1993 was one of hope and new beginnings. However, two developments illustrated the weakness of the political will of both parties, and the low level of trust between them. On the Israeli side, settlements continued to be expanded and Israeli control over land, borders and Palestinian movement was consolidated, with frequent and widespread closures, and some targeted killings. On the Palestinian side, there was early evidence that the goal of building strong and transparent institutions would not be achieved easily. There was also the inability to tackle directly and firmly the phenomenon of armed resistance, which increasingly took the form of acts of terrorism. In combination, these phenomena weakened the basic tenet of a settlement in the Middle East: ending the occupation that began in 1967 on the basis of the principle of "land for peace" in accordance with Security Council resolution 242 (1967). The assassination in 1995 of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who so clearly recognized that to attain peace it is necessary to negotiate not with one's friends but with one's enemies, was a tragic setback for the peace process.

6. For understandable reasons, the framers of the Oslo Accords felt that it was impossible to define end goals that would have come close to satisfying the concerns of both peoples at that time, and a gradualist approach was thought to be necessary. However, with the benefit of hindsight, certain aspects of the Oslo Accords have been identified as problematic. Some people believed that the actual implementation of the steps to be taken by the parties was supposed to be sequential rather than parallel — meaning that a failure of one party or spoiler could, and often did, derail the process. Importantly, there was no monitoring mechanism involved, either for settlement expansion or for violence. In addition, the Oslo Accords lacked a clearly defined end goal, and did not spell out where the parties would be at the end of the process. In consequence, the deeply divisive issues of final status were left undefined, and, as was feared by both parties, became hostages to the creation of facts on the ground.

7. There were some successes, including the Hebron Protocol and the Wye River agreement. However, the extent of the erosion of the Oslo peace process was made painfully clear with the failure of the Camp David peace talks and the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000 following the contentious visit of Ariel Sharon to the Al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in East Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority failed to rein in violence against Israeli civilians, or to confront militant groups. Moreover, despite major achievements in service provision, the Authority had also failed to institute reform and a transparent and accountable system of governance, and was weakened within by widespread allegations of corruption. For its part, Israel resorted to heavy force, increased extrajudicial killings, reoccupation of areas under Palestinian self-rule, and the confinement of the Palestinian President to his compound for two years. Israeli settlement activity continued, while the concepts of unilateralism and separation emerged and became popular. Israel began the construction of the barrier inside the West Bank that departed significantly from the 1967 line and was declared illegal by an advisory opinion of the International

Court of Justice. The Mitchell report of 2001 cited the underlying causes of the conflict to be the divergent expectations created by the Oslo process and the failure of both parties to recognize the grievances of the other, specifically the humiliation and suffering of Palestinians caused by continued occupation, and the fear felt by Israelis at continued violence and terrorism.

The Quartet and the road map process

8. Concerned by these stark trends, I invited representatives of the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United States of America for a discussion. Our consultation laid the ground for the establishment of the Quartet. On 10 April 2002, the Government of Spain, representing the rotating Presidency of the European Union, High Representative for the Common Security and Foreign Policy Javier Solana, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and myself began our discussions of what later became "A performance-based road map to a permanent two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" (S/2003/529, annex), or in short, the road map.

9. The framework for the road map was based on relevant Security Council resolutions, and the process was given impetus by two important developments. First, in March 2002, the Security Council explicitly endorsed the two-State solution in its resolution 1397 (2002). Secondly, the Council of the League of Arab States adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, the initiative of then Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah, in Beirut the same month. In it, the members of the League affirmed that achieving a just and comprehensive peace was their strategic choice and goal, asked for a complete Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders and a "just solution" to the refugee problem, and called for the establishment of an independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. All of this was to be in exchange for full recognition of Israel. Two months later, on 24 June, the commitment of the international community to a two-State solution was further consolidated when President Bush stated his vision for "two States, living side by side in peace and security", and went on to say that "this means that the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 will be ended through a settlement negotiated between the parties, based on United Nations resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), with Israeli withdrawal to secure and recognized borders". Since then, these elements, together with the road map, have defined our common vision for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

10. Formally presented to the parties on 30 April 2003, the road map outlined a three-phase plan aimed at achieving a final and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of a goal-driven and performance-based approach. The Quartet members shared a broad vision of the outcome of the peace process, and the group's combination of legitimacy, political strength and financial power was intended to provide a robust push for implementation of steps by the parties to achieve this shared goal. In addition to Security Council resolutions, the Quartet drew inspiration from the Arab Peace Initiative.

11. The road map was intended to re-energize the peace process by addressing the perceived weaknesses of Oslo while retaining its broad political outline. It defined the endgame as two States and the end of occupation (though without taking a clear stance on the border of the future Palestinian State), instituted a strict and clearly delineated parallelism, added a precise time frame for each phase of the process,

and specified that a monitoring mechanism would be established to provide a means of enforcement. The Palestinian side endorsed the road map; the Israeli endorsement came with important reservations.

12. In phase I of the road map, both parties were asked to commit to and implement certain basic steps, or obligations: an end to terror and incitement; reform of Palestinian Authority institutions and security forces; a freeze on all settlement activity and the dismantlement of settlement outposts; and ceasing all actions that undermined trust. Phase II (June-December 2003) was to be a transition phase focused on Palestinian institution building, and called for the convening of a first international conference to launch a process leading to the creation of an independent Palestinian State with provisional borders and a comprehensive regional peace process. In phase III (2004-2005), a second international conference would endorse the agreement on an independent Palestinian State with provisional borders and begin a process leading to a settlement of final status issues. The phases would be completed when the parties reached a final and comprehensive permanent status agreement and Arab States established full normal relations with Israel.

13. Phase I has regrettably yet to be completed, and indeed, developments over the past year have largely eroded previous gains. In order to again move forward, we need to examine honestly the sources of past and current failure, for which both parties and the international community must share responsibility.

14. Probably the greatest Palestinian shortcoming was not to do more to consolidate internal security and directly challenge the use of terrorism against Israeli civilians. President Arafat did not use his power and legitimacy to undertake serious reform of the security sector. More recently, following the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority could have used that opportunity to assert its control over militant groups then outside the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Authority. The failure to confront such groups, even within the framework of the negotiated ceasefire, contributed to the situation we face now in which militant groups persistently fire rockets from Gaza into Israel. Since the election of Hamas, moreover, the Palestinian Authority security forces have been fractured along political lines, and have been unable either to contain factional violence or to stop attacks against Israelis.

15. It is important to note that the Palestinian Authority's unwillingness or inability to undertake comprehensive institutional reform, and the public perception of pervasive corruption, was a major reason why the leadership lacked the necessary support for security reform, and indeed, one factor in the faltering of both the Oslo and road map processes and the electoral defeat of Fatah earlier this year. Many of the material benefits that accrued from the peace process reached only the elites and those close to political decision-makers, not the broad populace. Yet without broad socio-economic progress, there cannot be sustained political progress. Another factor was the Palestinian public's lack of trust in the political process with Israel, and the erosion in their belief that they would ever be allowed an independent and viable State.

16. During its first phase, the road map also called on Arab States to cut off all forms of support for groups engaging in terrorism. Many Arab countries, especially Egypt and Jordan, have engaged heavily in efforts to build up the Palestinian Authority's security capacity. However, the security weaknesses of the Authority have been compounded by the interventions of some regional parties, and the

increasingly close relationship that some militant Palestinian groups appear to have with the Syrian Arab Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran, in particular.

17. Israel's military actions in the West Bank and Gaza have frequently involved excessive or disproportionate use of force, causing heavy civilian casualties while also damaging Palestinian infrastructure and institutions. While Israel has a right to defend itself against terrorism and other forms of violence, which do so much damage to prospects for peace, Israel's methods of doing so have also done their share of damage to those prospects.

18. However, Israel's central failure lay in not halting its settlement enterprise, even though this is a clear phase I obligation under the road map. The continuation and even consolidation of Israeli settlements and related infrastructure on occupied land are the main reasons for the mistrust and frustration felt by ordinary Palestinians, which often find their outlet in violence of one form or another.

19. In the period that I have served as Secretary-General, the number of Israeli settlers living in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) has grown from 140,000 to 240,000. The settler population of East Jerusalem grew during this period from approximately 160,000 to 190,000. The area formally controlled by the settlements, according to Israeli law, now encompasses some 40 per cent of the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem). In a welcome development, the Government of Israel withdrew all settlements from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the West Bank in August 2005. However, during the year following this disengagement, West Bank settlements grew by 3,000 more people than had moved out of Gaza. Indeed, according to official Israeli figures, more than 1,000 settlers a month took up residence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory during 2005, a rate that appears to be continuing. In total, in the decade and a half after the Oslo Accords, Israel more than doubled its physical presence in the West Bank through settlements — a policy that was implemented under Labour, Likud and Kadima Governments. This remains the single biggest impediment to realizing a viable Palestinian State with territorial contiguity. Just as Israelis are dismayed that terrorism continued after Oslo and the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Palestinians are dismayed when they see prospects for a viable Palestinian State disappearing and the entrenchment of the occupation.

20. The use of violence on both sides and the continuation of settlement activity have been the key factors in the failure to move beyond phase I of the road map. Equally critical, however, has been the unwillingness of the Quartet to use its authority to push both parties forward. We must admit our own weaknesses, and we have been too hesitant in emphasizing those very elements that most distinguished the road map from the Oslo process — parallelism, monitoring and clear end goals. It is no surprise that today we find ourselves once again deadlocked.

21. In the past year, a further problematic factor was added. In September 2005 the Quartet encouraged the Palestinian Authority to take its own decision regarding participation in the forthcoming legislative elections. But after the victory of Hamas in those elections, which were held in January 2006, the members of the Quartet were faced with a dilemma. Hamas, having agreed to join that political process, was at best ambivalent about, and at worst rejected, the two-State solution. In the light of the new Government's failure to commit to the Quartet principles of 30 January, donors' legal obligations and political priorities led to a significant shift in funding to Palestinians during the past year: although funding has actually increased, the

channels of funding have shifted away from the Palestinian Authority. This shift, combined with Israel's refusal to hand over value added tax and customs revenues it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (an obligation under agreements reached in the Oslo framework), has largely caused the immense financial difficulties facing the Authority and contributed to the decline of Palestinian institutions.

22. The Hamas-led Palestinian government has still not reacted constructively to the call of the international community to review its stance and accept the basic principles of the peace process. Although the President of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization remain committed to the principles of the peace process, and the Palestinian Authority government claims that it does not object to President Abbas negotiating with Israel (provided the outcome is submitted to the approval of a reformed Palestine Liberation Organization, the Palestinian Legislative Council or a referendum), Israel believes that his scope to negotiate a final status agreement is limited by the disparate visions of the elected government and the Palestinian Legislative Council, on the one hand, and the Palestinian Authority President and the Palestine Liberation Organization, on the other, concerning such an agreement. The continued equivocation of the Hamas-led government ill serves the aspirations of the Palestinian people. At the same time, Hamas is able to tap into a widely felt Palestinian sentiment that the Palestine Liberation Organization and the previous Palestinian Authority obtained too few achievements as a result of their negotiations with Israel. Dialogue between, and compromises on the part of, both main Palestinian parties are clearly in the interests of the Palestinian people as a whole.

The current situation

23. At the time of writing, efforts to form a Palestinian national unity government appear to have stalled. However, a precarious and imperfect ceasefire is in place in Gaza, and tentative feelers have been put out regarding the possibility of resumed Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, as well as broader regional dialogue. The ceasefire follows a period of political deadlock and spiralling violence that has had serious consequences for civilians on both sides, with Palestinian militants firing rockets from Gaza into Israel, and massive Israeli military operations and targeted killings that have led to several hundred Palestinian deaths this year, at a rate that has increased significantly since June 2006. Negotiations under Egyptian auspices are continuing for the release of the Israeli soldier captured at that time. Prime Minister Olmert recently announced that he would consider a prisoner exchange of 1,400 Palestinian prisoners, including lawmakers and officials seized by Israel after Corporal Gilad Shalit's capture. There are an estimated 9,000 Palestinians currently in detention in Israel, a matter of burning concern for the Palestinian population. The release of some of them and also the Israeli soldier would be a very positive development.

24. I have consistently condemned the firing of rockets and suicide bombings by Palestinians, and fully acknowledge Israel's right to self-defence. I do not condone terrorism in any form and condemn it unequivocally. But I stress with equal conviction that Israel's right to self-defence must be carried out in accordance with international law. The repeated phenomenon of large numbers of civilian casualties from Israeli military operations is not acceptable. Israel's excessive use of force

exacerbates existing resentments and fuels those who advocate hatred, be they in the region or elsewhere.

25. Political deadlock and the security situation have combined to undermine the efforts undertaken by James Wolfensohn as the Quartet's Special Envoy. A year ago, on 15 November 2005, the Agreement on Movement and Access was concluded. Implementation of this agreement, intended to promote peaceful economic development and improve the situation in the Gaza Strip, has been limited, with Israel citing security concerns: despite the stationing of European Union observers, the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt has been open for only 58 per cent of scheduled opening hours over the past year and for only 9 per cent since June. This year, Palestinians have been allowed to export on average only 14 truckloads of produce per day, a tiny fraction of minimum export levels needed to prevent further decline of the Palestinian economy and suffering of the population. No Palestinian worker has been allowed to cross at Erez to access jobs in Israel since March 2006, and no progress has been reported on bus or truck convoys between Gaza and the West Bank. Similarly, there has been no progress reported on plans to build the Gaza seaport and airport. One year after signing the agreement, the Government of Israel has still not presented its plan to reduce internal closure measures inside the West Bank. In fact, the total number of obstacles has increased from 400 a year ago to 542 today, stifling still further Palestinians' efforts to lead normal daily lives.

26. Given the complexity of the situation, continuing high levels of tension and the steep decline in Palestinian living standards since 2000, the United Nations presence on the ground continues to be of key importance. United Nations peacekeeping operations in the region — the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) — play a crucial role in helping to maintain regional security. The United Nations provides considerable assistance to meet the basic needs of Palestinians throughout the region.

27. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is a major asset through which the international community supports some 4.3 million Palestine refugees in the region. For 56 years, it has delivered vital services to them, helping to raise their educational and health status to among the highest levels in the region. Investment by UNRWA in the skills and self-reliance of the refugees has enabled many to pursue productive careers in their communities and host countries, in the Arab Gulf and in the West. The Agency serves as a vital antidote to the poverty and deprivation which come with conflict and occupation. I note with concern that the Agency continues to be seriously underfunded, and that its budget shortfall this year of over $100 million is the greatest ever.

28. The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process has, since 1994, been present on the ground to enhance the involvement of the United Nations system during the transition process and to strengthen inter-agency cooperation. In 1999, with the permission of the General Assembly and informing the Council, I designated the Special Coordinator as my Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, and also for discussions with the parties and the international community in all matters related to the peace process. In 2006, I further strengthened the Office of the Special Coordinator by designating a Deputy Special Coordinator who acts as

Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator to consolidate United Nations leadership on aid policy and common operational issues. This appointment also builds on the work of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs since 2003, which has considerably sharpened our picture of the humanitarian problems caused by restrictions on movement and access, the barrier and settlement activity.

29. I am proud of the work that my United Nations colleagues perform in assisting Palestinians and working with all parties towards a lasting peace. It is with some regret that I note that the United Nations role as aid provider has become more important to Palestinians during the past year, as living conditions have deteriorated sharply and parts of the Palestinian Authority have almost ceased to function. The importance of using my good offices in helping to resolve crises and propose ways forward has also been very clear to me throughout my term as Secretary-General, not least during the Lebanon crisis this summer.

Lebanon

30. My tenure as Secretary-General underlined the special role that the United Nations has developed in Lebanon, a role that has grown even more intense, especially over the past two years. Our engagement signals the Organization's enduring commitment to Lebanon's stability, unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence. In May 2000, Israel withdrew its last troops from southern Lebanon after more than 20 years of occupation and in fulfilment of its obligations under resolution 425 (1978). With the help of my good offices and intense shuttle diplomacy, a line of withdrawal known as the Blue Line was delineated, which both Israel and Lebanon accepted and committed themselves to respecting (though Lebanon expressed its reservations regarding the conformity of the Line in the area known as the Shab'a farmlands). The Security Council endorsed the position I took in my report of 22 May 2000 (S/2000/459), which set out the demarcation line to confirm the Israeli withdrawal, and stated that "the adoption of this line for the practical purpose of confirming the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in compliance with resolution 425 (1978) is without prejudice to any internationally recognized border agreement that Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic may wish to conclude in the future". The Security Council has since repeatedly endorsed the Blue Line and called on both parties to respect it.

31. The period just after the Israeli withdrawal was one of hope for Lebanon with the promise of reconstruction in the south. This followed the rebuilding of the capital, Beirut, renewed investment in the country and the return of a significant portion of the Lebanese diaspora. However, between October 2000 and the beginning of the past summer's full-scale and devastating conflict between Hizbollah and Israel, the Blue Line witnessed sporadic, limited exchanges of fire in the Shab'a farmlands area and elsewhere, periods of tense calm but also of intense conflict and loss of life on both sides. Of particular concern was the capture and killing by Hizbollah of three Israeli soldiers, whose bodies were not returned until January 2003, in the Shab'a farmlands area in October 2000 and the capture, in July 2006, of two soldiers who unfortunately remain in captivity and whose release is essential.

32. This latter event precipitated a tragic conflict that took too long to stop. Israel's ground invasion into southern Lebanon and the bombardment of large parts

of the country killed an estimated 1,200 Lebanese and injured over 4,000, killed four United Nations military observers, created nearly a million internally displaced people and destroyed a large part of the country's infrastructure. Over 140 Israelis, 43 of them civilians, were killed and over 100 injured, many by Hizbollah attacks against population centres in northern Israel, using rockets secured by or provided to the movement without the approval of the Government of Lebanon. Further sources of tension include reports of weapons supplies to Hizbollah, as well as continued Israeli overflights in violation of Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and in contradiction of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006). The latter resolution, painstakingly negotiated and passed a full month after the hostilities began, was the framework for United Nations efforts to secure a cessation of hostilities, to be underpinned by a stronger UNIFIL. This expanded UNIFIL, however, was intended to buy time, not substitute, for progress on the political track both within Lebanon and also between Lebanon and its neighbours.

33. The past two tumultuous years in Lebanon's history have illustrated the vulnerabilities of the Lebanese State to both external influences and internal political divisions, and their potential to ignite conflicts old and new. Throughout this period, the involvement of the United Nations has been considerable. Within the domestic context, the extension of President Lahoud's mandate signalled for many in Lebanon the beginning of a political division between those who openly opposed the presence and role of the Syrian Arab Republic in Lebanon and those who were perceived as having a pro-Syrian approach. The Security Council's adoption of resolution 1559 (2004) was in keeping with its commitment to support Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity, which led, five years after the Israeli withdrawal, to the Syrian withdrawal in the spring of 2005 from Lebanon. The adoption of the resolution was followed by the assassination in Beirut of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and 22 others in February 2005. The Security Council has followed up on developments since, including the subsequent assassinations and assassination attempts against political figures and key figures in the Lebanese media. It requested the United Nations to set up the International Independent Investigation Commission and most recently to agree with the Lebanese authorities on the statutes for a special tribunal for Lebanon to try the perpetrators of these crimes.

34. I have reported in my letter of 1 December 2006 (S/2006/933) on the most recent progress that has been made and the outstanding challenges related to the implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006). I would note here only the historic achievement of the deployment of the Lebanese army in the area south of the Litani River and along the Blue Line and the crucial role that an expanded UNIFIL is now playing in helping the Lebanese army to ensure that the area is "free of armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and those of UNIFIL". I would also note the considerable achievement of the establishment of the UNIFIL Maritime Task Force to assist the Lebanese navy in securing its territorial waters. However, I fully recognize the limitations of peacekeeping activities and stress the importance of ensuring the right political context in which those activities can be most effective. The period following the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon till the outbreak of hostilities in the summer of 2006 illustrates the limits to the monitoring and peacekeeping capabilities of UNIFIL, especially when operating in a difficult political environment and with limited mandates and resources. Hizbollah's arms build-up

during this period was a continuing cause for concern, as are reports that these efforts may have continued.

35. I am deeply concerned at the present time about prospects for the stability and independence of Lebanon. The serious political crisis which the country is now experiencing illustrates the need for continued efforts to assist the country. Lebanon remains hostage to its own difficult history. Since the end of the civil war and the signing of the Taif Accords in 1989, Lebanon has remained mired in an incomplete political transformation that has not seen further progress away from the instinct for confessionalism. The Lebanese themselves, especially now, bear much of the responsibility for ensuring the country does not slide deeper into tension and providing a way forward based on a degree of national consensus on key issues. In this regard, I am disappointed that the various rounds of high-level talks, which started with the National Dialogue in February 2006, have not led to agreement among Lebanon's leaders. I also note that despite the Taif Accords and the agreement achieved in the Dialogue regarding the question of Palestinian weapons outside the camps and living standards, there has been little progress achieved in implementing these decisions to date. Furthermore, I continue to advocate a mechanism to address the question of disarmament of Hizbollah's weapons, whether by resuming the National Dialogue or within the existing institutions of the State. Serious progress on these issues in accordance with resolution 1701 (2006) is one of the principles for a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution.

36. Outside parties too, especially those in the region, have a responsibility to play a positive role in ensuring Lebanon's stability, independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Syrian Arab Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran in particular have much influence on Lebanese parties, which I expect them to exert in a constructive way. The Syrian Arab Republic also has a role to play in enabling Lebanon's full assertion of its sovereignty by agreeing to delineate the joint border between the two countries and by meeting its verbal commitment to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with Lebanon.

37. Given its history, and perhaps also because of its small size and geography, Lebanon has been inextricably bound with more powerful forces, whether immediate neighbours or colonial or regional powers. Its mosaic of cultures and confessional groups has been both a strength, giving it unique attributes within the region, and a weakness, allowing for these to be manipulated into lines of conflict. I would warn that as the region has affected Lebanon, so instability within Lebanon, and a return to the dark days of the 1970s and 1980s, can have a further destabilizing affect on the region as a whole.

Golan Heights

38. During my tenure, there was no movement towards handover of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights to the Syrian Arab Republic in return for peace between the Syrian Arab Republic and Israel. I was disappointed that the last serious attempt by the United States to negotiate a solution to this long-standing issue ended in failure in 2000.

39. Some 20,000 Israeli settlers live in the Golan Heights, alongside an Arab population of about 18,400. The Golan Heights is fully incorporated into the Israeli legal, administrative and social service delivery systems. The Arab population is

generally unable to travel to the Syrian Arab Republic to visit family members and has, over time, experienced increasing limits on land use owing to Israeli zoning restrictions. But the Arab population suffers neither the deep insecurity nor the economic deprivation and restrictions on movement which characterize life in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and for their part, Israelis have faced little violence emanating from this territory. This must not, however, lead the international community into complacency about the need to resolve this problem — indeed, the failure to do so just because the situation on the ground is calm sends entirely the wrong message.

40. As with the peace treaties between Israel and Egypt in 1979, and Israel and Jordan in 1994, a sustained effort must be made to achieve a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic based on resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). For as long as the principle of land for peace that underlies those resolutions is not implemented between these two countries, there can be no comprehensive regional peace. Israel and some other countries continue to view the Syrian Arab Republic as a supporter of militant groups in Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory that seek to carry out attacks against Israel. For its part, the Syrian Arab Republic points to Israeli Government statements which declare the Golan Heights to be an inseparable part of Israel. Israel has recently rejected the notion of resumed negotiations with the Syrian Arab Republic, despite statements of President Assad raising this prospect. It is clear that the parties must think anew about their approach to this vital issue, which is so intrinsically connected to progress on other tracks in the Middle East peace process.

Observations

41. As Secretary-General, I have been conscious of the enormous responsibility that rests on the United Nations to contribute to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. I have also been acutely aware of the difficulties associated with doing so, some of which stem from the polarization of the membership on the conflict and the consequent range of positions taken by different principal and intergovernmental organs. One side perceives itself as being singled out for unfair criticism; the other regards the Organization as ineffective in ensuring compliance with its resolutions. Accusations of double standards are regularly made in both directions, and each with some justification.

42. In my view, until the Member States match their professions of concern with a concerted effort to empower the United Nations to make a strategic difference, I am convinced that other forums will be sought to ensure effective multilateral engagement on the conflict. The formation of the Quartet and my participation in it embody this conviction.

43. Unfortunately, however, as I leave office, I am concerned that the divisions which have often paralyzed the United Nations itself now also increasingly inhibit the capacity of the Quartet (and its regional partners) to play the beneficial role which it could do were it to act with determination and consistency. We therefore find ourselves at a crossroads, with increasing frustration — both in the region and in the international community at large — at the Quartet's regrettably limited effectiveness, matched by the apparent lack of any alternative mechanism at present. Since it is my conviction that, ultimately, the solution will only be achieved by

direct negotiations between the parties, facilitated and sustained by effective multilateral engagement, this is a source of deep concern which I would urge Member States to reflect on. The observations which follow are designed to point the way towards realizing more effective multilateral engagement.

44. The Quartet retains its relevance because of its combination of legitimacy, political strength and economic influence. As for the road map, it is still the reference point around which any effort to re-energize a political effort on the Israeli-Palestinian track should be centred. It remains the only document of recent years accepted — albeit with substantial reservations by Israel — by Palestinian and Israeli leaderships alike, by the Arab States, and by the Security Council. The Prime Minister of Israel has recently reiterated that he sees a return to the road map as a way forward, and the Palestinian President is committed to it. Nevertheless, to be meaningful, its shortcomings will need to be addressed urgently.

45. To restore a sense of faith in the practicability of the road map, it is crucial that its sponsors, the Quartet members, act together to create the conditions for re-energizing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The Quartet must also find a way to institutionalize its consultations with the relevant regional partners, building on the Arab Peace Initiative and the constructive spirit in which the 21 September 2006 ministerial meeting of the Security Council was held. The Quartet should also engage the parties directly in its deliberations, as it announced that it would do on 20 September 2006.

46. Under the revitalized stewardship of the Quartet, it should therefore be possible to look again at the road map with a view to restating its basic goals, principles and end destination; identifying priority action items in the security arena and in the economic, humanitarian and institution building realms; addressing the political issues and political negotiations; and updating its timetable. The Quartet should consider the need for greater clarity at the outset regarding the parameters of an end-game deal. It will also need to tackle openly the road map's premise of parallelism and monitoring: it is hard to see the consolidation of progress as we move forward without serious and systematic independent monitoring on the ground.

47. To retain its validity, the Quartet also needs to be open to new ideas and initiatives from within the region and outside it, and from State and non-State actors alike. Equally, it has to match the responsibility entrusted to it to oversee this process with a method of work that is systematic, even-handed and proactive rather than reactive, and ensures common messaging to the parties.

48. There are also a number of issues that I believe should be addressed by the Quartet and the international community. Politically, we need a policy to address the dilemma posed by Hamas as constructively as possible to stem the growing trend towards disintegration of Palestinian society, by renewing support for Palestinian institutions, promoting efforts to achieve unity among Palestinian factions on basic principles of the peace process, and persuading Israel not to pursue any policy which damages institutions or deprives Palestinians of democratically elected and therefore legitimate leaders. We must recognize that the postponement of a settlement has taken a social and political toll, and that countercurrents to the previously widely accepted notion of a two-State solution have grown and acquired greater cogency. Forging an internal Palestinian consensus once again around a two-State solution should be seen as a process rather than an event, one that should be

encouraged and nurtured. This could be considerably quickened by a credible effort between the parties and from the international community to re-energize the political process.

49. Similarly, the international community needs to find constructive responses to the challenge posed by democratic choices made by the peoples of the region. Whatever some might think of the actual results, it is undeniable that the legislative elections that brought Hamas to power last January were remarkably transparent, free and fair by the standards of most of the Arab world. Support for the democratic aspirations of the peoples of the region is something the international community must do more to sustain. For their part, victorious parties, even radical ones, need to acknowledge that with power comes responsibilities, including acceptance that the legitimacy and rights of others need to be respected too, and that the previous decisions and agreements reached by the governments to which they have been elected cannot be ignored or put aside without serious consequence.

50. One immediate priority is to work to devise new ways of protecting Palestinian and Israeli civilians, as suggested in the Security Council and mentioned recently by the General Assembly: the monitoring foreseen in the road map can help to ensure far greater accountability. The international community cannot shepherd a process that tolerates the blatant abuse of human rights and international law by all parties. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on a recent visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, found that human rights abuses were systematic, chronic and widespread. I agree with her that the rule of the law should not be contingent on peace. I also agree that there is a pressing need for mechanisms for the protection of civilians, and hope that possible mechanisms such as international observers will be further explored, with the strong backing of the Quartet and the Council.

51. I would urge the Quartet and the Council to explore the feasibility of consolidating the current Gaza ceasefire within an international framework. As in Lebanon earlier this year, the parameters of the political framework for a permanent solution are clear, but the political will to advance it is not sufficient. In order to halt the current violence and open a space for negotiations, a stronger international role is required. Elements for this role could include:

(a) To consolidate the current Gaza ceasefire by working with the parties to define its parameters and rules;

(b) To work to extend the ceasefire to the West Bank;

(c) To promote unconditional and open-ended talks between the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of the Palestinian Authority;

(d) To work with the parties to secure their agreement to the deployment of international observers to monitor the ceasefire;

(e) To establish with the parties a mechanism for the protection of civilians;

(f) To monitor consistently the actions of the parties to implement existing commitments and agreements and ensure that the results of this monitoring are systematically acted upon;

(g) to ensure that the political framework for negotiations is updated and credible, including clear parameters for the settlement of final status issues, so that the end goal of the process is visible to all concerned.

52. In this regard, I urge the members of the Security Council and the Quartet to consider viable options that would be acceptable to both parties, as I am convinced that an active and systematic third party role is indispensable. Israel has traditionally been suspicious of such roles. However, the record shows that an international presence on the ground has been a key feature of nearly every *modus vivendi* reached between Israel and its adversaries. The Israeli-Syrian border would not be stable without the peacekeepers of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force. The situation in Hebron, tense and dangerous as it is, would be even worse without the Temporary International Presence in Hebron. The full disengagement from Gaza would not have been achieved had the European Union not stepped forward to monitor the Rafah crossing. The Israeli-Hizbollah war of 2006 would probably have come much sooner and been still more explosive had UNIFIL not been present, and would not have been ended without a reconfigured UNIFIL to help implement Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), whose full implementation is in the interest of all States in the region. In my years as Secretary-General, I have noticed a growing Israeli awareness that third-party roles on the ground can serve Israeli as well as Arab interests. As there is a common interest in achieving a two-State solution, so there should be a common awareness that this will not happen without a stronger third-party role on the ground.

53. The challenge of how to pursue a comprehensive regional approach to the conflict must also be tackled. Ultimately, we are dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, not that between Israel and the Palestinians alone. The region and its concerns need to be fully addressed, as an ultimate peace will be between Israel and its neighbours, although progress on one track should not be held hostage to progress on another. I would like to remind the Syrian Arab Republic that it must pursue policies that demonstrate its commitment to peace and stability in the region, in particular with its immediate neighbours. I equally remind Israel that comprehensive regional peace cannot be achieved without a return of the Golan Heights to the Syrian Arab Republic.

54. I note that many have suggested the possibility of convening an international conference, along the lines of that held in 1991 in Madrid, so that the full regional dimensions of the conflict can be addressed. This idea must now be explored again. The resuscitation of the regional track of the peace process, which is an inherent element of the road map, is in the interests of all. We must work to ensure that the conditions are right and that the foundations for trust and successful negotiations are laid through meaningful gestures.

55. As I leave office, it is a matter of deep personal regret that peace in the Middle East has not been achieved. The need for the international community to engage with the main parties and finally reach a settlement of the fundamental Middle East problem — a settlement whose inevitable contours we know so well — is even more pressing today than it was 10 years ago.

United Nations S/2006/957

Security Council

Distr.: General
11 December 2006

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General concerning the credentials of the alternate representative of the Russian Federation on the Security Council

Pursuant to rule 15 of the provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council, the Secretary-General wishes to report that he has received a note verbale dated 30 November 2006 from the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations stating that Andrei A. Artasov has been appointed alternate representative of the Russian Federation on the Security Council.

In the opinion of the Secretary-General, this note verbale constitutes adequate provisional credentials.

06-65211 (E) 111206